

Will tourism rebound after Old Man's tumble?

By **HOLLY RAMER**
 The Associated Press

FRANCONIA NOTCH, N.H. — The majestic Old Man of the Mountain kept watch over New Hampshire for thousands of years. Richard and Carolyn Hansen missed it by five months.

The couple from Ukiah, Calif., had wanted to see New England's fall foliage for years, so in early 2003, they booked their flight and plotted their itinerary. High on their list of destinations was the Old Man of the Mountain — a massive, naturally formed granite profile that had been attracting tourists to Franconia Notch since the early 1800s and had become integral to the state's identity.

And they weren't deterred when the 40-foot-high ledges crumbled 1,200 feet to the ground just months before their arrival.

"It was a given that you have to go there. It's like a pilgrimage," said Richard Hansen, 54, the marketing director for an Internet service provider. "So in spite of the fact that Mother Nature had taken its toll on it, we still made the trek over there to make sure we saw it, or at least get an idea and perception of where it was."

"It would be kind of like over here on our side of the country, if I had planned a trip to San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge had fallen down, I think I'd still go see where the Golden Gate Bridge used to be," he said.

Five years after the Old Man's demise, it's tough to get a clear picture of how the collapse has affected tourism in the White Mountains or to predict whether a planned memorial for the site will continue to lure visitors. But the few statistics available, coupled with anecdotal evidence, suggest that that unlike the Hansens, at least some tourists are staying away.

Sales at an ice cream shop near the Old Man site dropped 68 percent between the summers of 2002 and 2006, according to statistics

from the state Department of Resources and Economic Development. The number of riders on the Cannon Mountain Aerial Tramway decreased 25 percent, and visitors to the Flume, a natural granite gorge featuring waterfalls, glacial boulders and historic covered bridges, fell 23 percent.

There's no way to tell whether those numbers are a product of the Old Man's fall. Mark Okrant, director of the Institute for New Hampshire Studies at Plymouth State University, notes that all those numbers already were declining before the Old Man fell and that other factors — mainly weather — could account for the fluctuations. But he does believe tourism has suffered.

"Anecdotally, we are hearing that business has not been good since the Old Man fell in the communities immediately north of the notch. And frankly, while I was skeptical about the impact right after it happened, I am no longer skeptical," said Okrant, whose institute researches state tourism trends. "I do believe that the Old Man's falling has had a negative impact on the visitor traffic north of Franconia Notch."

Okrant, whose own family made an annual trip to the White Mountains when he was growing up, believes the Old Man's fall has had a bigger impact on repeat visitors to the region than on new traffic.

"Once we moved up here, people who had been up here before suddenly wanted to come visit me. People who had never seen it before were less excited," he said. "In fact, some people were skeptical about what the big deal was if they hadn't experienced it over a number of years."

Dick Hamilton, who retired in 2005 after decades spent promoting the White Mountains as a tourist destination, said even before the Old Man's fall, he noticed a reduced interest in the Old Man and the state's other nat-

ural attractions.

"Tourists are more into active tourism rather than passive tourism. They aren't necessarily content to just drive through something and look at things. They want to get involved, take a hike, take a walk, take a bike ride."

Hamilton is on the board of directors of the Old Man of the Mountain Legacy Fund, which is raising money to build a memorial. Construction hasn't begun yet, but the design calls for five granite stones — including the largest ever quarried in North America — placed in such a way that when viewed from a raised platform, they merge into one form evoking the outline of the rock profile. In addition to the stone monoliths, a gateway consisting of stones held in place by cables and turnbuckles will be constructed to honor the Old Man's caretakers, who used such equipment to secure its uppermost rocks for decades.

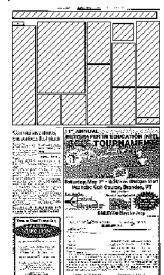
The third element of the memorial will be a new park at the water's edge featuring steel cannon-like "profilers" that will allow viewers to line up the sculptures' irregular edges and "see" the outline of the Old Man on the cliff where it once appeared.

"What we're trying to do there is to make it into an activity-oriented facility rather than just a thing on the mountain," said Hamilton.

Jayne O'Connor, who succeeded Hamilton as president of White Mountain Attractions, is optimistic that the memorial will attract new visitors to the region, and the 16 attractions her company promotes. She said those attractions, which include Santa's Village, Lost River Gorge and the Polar Caves, had their best season in 15 years in 2007.

"As far as the Old Man goes, we now sort of have our own Mayflower, or one of those attractions that are long gone but are remembered and people still visit the sites," she said.

In the tourism industry, the



effort to hang onto to an attraction after its physical loss is known as "attraction residuality," explains David Weaver of the University of South Carolina's School of Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management. In 2005, he and a colleague featured the Old Man of the Mountain in a research paper highlighting the need for tourist attractions to plan for disasters.

Such planning will become all the more important as the tourism industry is increasingly targeted by terrorists and as tourism continues to expand into areas vulnerable to natural disasters, he said. The Old Man of the Mountain, he said, was a "lesson in complacency."

"It's sort of funny, because there was a 100-year history of trying to shore that thing up," he said of the Old Man. "We know there was gravity at work there and weathering, and so it really was just a matter of time, but nonetheless, you just think, 'Oh, it's never going to happen. And when it happen, it just caught people completely unaware."

"We're really using this as a case study to say, let's do some contingency planning here. It can happen to you; here are some of the things you can do about it," he said.

One option is reconstruction or replication of an attraction — an idea that was raised and rejected soon after the Old Man's fall. Instead, New Hampshire has focused on memorialization and redefinition of the attraction. The success of such efforts depends largely on striking the correct balance between entertainment and good taste, Weaver argues.

"Whatever they do, I really think they have to keep it modest and they have to keep it tasteful because with the passage of time, it's really going to lose its power as an iconic attraction," he said. "For people who've never seen it before, it's just going to be some quaint old story from Grandad

or something."

At the Indian Head Resort in nearby Lincoln, marketing director Stew Weldon said he believes the memorial will be popular with tourists, both repeat visitors and newcomers. His business actually picked up a bit after the Old Man's fall as curious tourists arrived to check out the wreckage, he said, and Old Man of the Mountain merchandise continues to be popular with customers at the resort's gift shop. One coffee mug for sale depicts a moose with a tear sliding down its face next to the caption: "I Miss the

Old Man."

"The Old Man of the Mountain certainly has not been forgotten," Weldon said.

ON THE NET

The Old Man of the Mountain Legacy Fund

www.oldmanofthemountainlegacyfund.org/

Franconia Notch State Park

www.nhstateparks.org/stateparks/alphabetical-order/franconia-notch-state-park/



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Massive cables that once held the profile of the Old Man of the Mountain in place are seen at the top of Cannon Cliffs in Franconia, N.H., on Thursday.

Printing imperfections present during scanning

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